Chapter - VI

Conclusion
CONCLUSION

The Persian Gulf region had always been linked with the Persian national and cultural mythology. The Iranian leadership, well aware of the nation's pride in its past, could hardly ignore its interests in the Persian Gulf. However, it was the Iraqi revolution of 1958, the Kuwaiti incident of 1961 that drew closer attention of Iran towards the Persian Gulf and it began thinking in the terms of giving concrete expressions of its interests in this vital region. This was reflected in the disposition of its armed preparedness.

However, the most important impetus to the growing Iranian interest was the security of the Persian Gulf. The Gulf is Iran's only maritime outlet to the world. It is thus a vital life line for the country's commerce for both imports and exports. Unlike Saudi Arabia and Iraq, it possesses no pipelines to the Mediterranean. The Gulf was also of interests to Iran because of its proximity to the oil-rich continental shelf that lay beneath its contested waters. Moreover, the possibility of the region coming under the control of unfriendly Arab States, or under the influence of a hostile Arab League was also alarming. Therefore it embarked on a policy of self-reliances for the defence of its interests in the Gulf.

Iran's readiness to pursue self-reliance was due to a number of factors, including its own long-standing desire to play a more active role in the Gulf. These are as follows:
(a) the contraction of Britain's responsibilities; (b) the readiness of the United States to have its regional partners assume more responsibility for local defence; (c) the growing economic strength and military might of Iran; (d) the determination of Iranian leadership to rely more on its own resources in regional affairs; (e) the added incentive of domestic political advantage to be gained thereby; and (f) the failure to forge a formal defence pact.

The 1979 revolution in Iran undid what had evolved into a tacit arrangement for assuring regional security. Ever since the March 1975 Algiers Agreement had been signed, pragmatism had brought Iran and Iraq together, and with the other Gulf states, there had grown up a recognition of the need to exclude outside powers and assure regional security by littoral states. Inter-dependence - economically as oil suppliers, and geographically as neighbours in a small and combustible region - had contributed to this softening of attitude. With the ouster of the Shah, Gulf politics changed markedly. Reliance on the "twin pillars" of Tehran and Riyadh to guarantee regional security ended, prompting a search for ways to make a more direct US presence in the region feasible. The Revolutionary regime in Tehran withdraw from CENTO and proclaimed the US as its principal enemy.

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic posed a serious threat to its immediate neighbours. It unravelled the existing security consensus and made it virtually impossible to substitute another.

The Shah had frequently been criticised by Arabs for
his relations with Israel, for Iran's arms build-up and for Iran's alignment with the West. Khomeini came to power vowing to reverse all three features. In place of ties with Israel, he quickly substituted these with the PLO; he cancelled all pending large-scale military purchases and terminated all security relationship with the Western states.

Iran's Revolutionary thus replaced Iran, guardian of the region, with Iran, disruptor of the region. An Iran marginally involved in Arab politics was succeeded by an Iran militarily insistent on the Central role in Islam. By claiming the right and duty to expand its revolution to purify Islam, foil Western oppression, and bring back justice for the Palestinians, Tehran posed a serious threat to its neighbours, who with their Sunni governments, monarchical systems and Western connections appeared to exemplify all that the Iranians opposed. Most directly affected was the Ba'ath government in Baghdad which administered a state whose largest group was comprised of Shiis.

By claiming for itself the right to judge the Islamic credentials of its neighbours - and by implication their fate - the new Iranian regime unnerved its smaller Muslim brothers. While provoking Iraq by threatening to replace the Ba'ath regime with an Islamic one, the Iranians dropped their military guard, undertaking major purges of the armed forces, launching operation against Kurdish population, and pursuing policies vis-a-vis the US which ultimately resulsted
in its virtual international as well as regional isolation. The result was Iraq's decision to attack the apparently weakened but still threatening regime - both for preventive reasons and to capitalize on the opportunity to make a mark on the politics of the Gulf.

The subsequent prolonged war saw a split developing within the Arab World, between Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Morocco on one side, and Syria and Libya on the other.

The Gulf states, unnerved by the Revolutionary regime in Tehran, found a breathing space with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 to consider a more concrete response. In May 1981, these states announced the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the aim of which was clearly self-defence, and security issues - internal and external. Tehran virtually ensured their forming a common front with Iraq, and their organization of a security arrangement in opposition to Iran. As the war progressed and the revolution became radicalised opposition to the conservative Arab government increased apace, and this was exacerbated by GCC states cash and credit contributions to Iraq's war efforts. Iran, at the same time, did try to separate the war issues with those of the border disputes with its neighbours. Despite GCC states support for Iraq, they maintained channels, of communication open with Tehran. During the course of the Iran-Iraq war one could detect an ambiguity in Iran's foreign policy. It was a mixture of pragmatism and ideology, restraint and extremism.
In the aftermath of the war, Iran though formidable, suffered a loss of power and influence in the Gulf. Its own capabilities were impaired by the long, costly war and by the long inevitable drain on its energies which will only be further evident once the process of reconstruction starts.

At the same time the Gulf states became much more conscious of their vulnerability and of the potential dangers posed by the local Iranian and Shiī communities. In addition to improved intelligence and cooperation on internal security affairs, these states embarked on a policy of defensive re-traditionalization to weaken the Islamic case against their regimes and reduce their exposure to threats from this side.

However, Iran's threat to its neighbouring Gulf state has always been some thing of an exaggeration. With latent US support, the combined effort of CENTCOM and the Gulf Cooperation Council was enough to deter any exalted Iranian intervention or adventurism in the Gulf.

The Iranian acceptance of the UN Resolution 598 was, more or less, motivated by its inability to confront the US fleet directly. Rafsanjani showed extraordinary pragmatism in trying to break Iran's international isolation. He set about garnering sympathy for the Iranian cause as the victim of US aggression, saying that Iran had often made enemies needlessly. At the same time a friendly gesture that had been cut short by the aircraft disaster was eagerly pursued and contacts with the West, notably Britain and France were improved. Within hours of acceptance of the UN Resolution
598, the Iranian leadership announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Canada. Renewing its relationship with Canada was widely seen as an effort by Tehran to negotiate with the United States.

Simultaneously, Iran launched a massive diplomatic offensive at the GCC states. Iran's acting foreign minister, Ali Besharati, visited Oman and the UAE with a message from the then President Khamenei on the regional developments as well as Iran's stance on the UN Resolution 598. A special envoy was sent to Kuwait to discuss bilateral ties. The net results of the offensive were manifold; Kuwait and Bahrain upgraded their diplomatic representation in Tehran. Oman proceeded with signing a joint economic-industrial commission agreement with Iran. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia indicated that Riyadh's relation with Tehran will be restored in not too a distant future.

However, Iran's policy of neutrality during the Kuwaiti crisis paid rich dividends in terms of its rehabilitation in the comity of nations. Long considered a pariah state, Iran suddenly found itself the centre of attraction, both regionally as well as globally. Tehran became the hub of diplomatic activity as a stream of foreign dignitaries poured into the Iranian capital with a view to finding a solution to the Gulf crisis.

In the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Iran suddenly found itself much sought after. While welcoming Saddam Hussein's tactical acceptance of all the major
Iranian demands including the principle of *thalwag* as the demarcation line of their borders, Iran, in an unequivocal terms condemned Iraqi aggression. It not only conformed to all the UN sanctions imposed upon Iraq but also, in contrast to its earlier insistence on keeping the Gulf out of bounds for foreign powers, came round to accepting it as a necessary evil. However, it constantly maintained that it was a local issue the solution of which has to be found locally.

The GCC countries unnerved by Saddam's wooing of Iran launched a major diplomatic effort to maintain Iran's sympathy for them if not outright support. Iran accepted their regrets over past mistakes but made it very clear that without its presence no regional security arrangement was either feasible or complete. It called upon the Gulf states to form a politico-military structure to guarantee regional stability and security of the oil fields.

Alarmed by the disintegration of Iraq, Iran very strongly condemned the US for exceeding the UN's mandate. It even came out with a peace proposal for the resolution of the conflict. However, in the aftermath of the war, Iran was gravely enraged over the brutal suppression of the Iraqi Kurds and the Shiites by the troops loyal to Saddam. It supported the Western move to protect the Kurds and the Shiites.

Iran's stand on the Kuwaiti benefitted it in many ways. Diplomatic relations between Tehran and the UK was restored in September 1990 without any reference to the Rushdie
affair. Most important was the improvement of its 'non-relationship' equation with the US. Iranian oil sales to the US, which had ceased in 1987, were officially resumed in June 1991. Because of the American neutrality, the World Bank extended to Iran its first loan since 1978. The Americans also released part of the Iranian assets which it had frozen since the hostage crisis.

Iran's relations with its regional Arab neighbours improved considerably. Saudi-Iran relations were restored in March 1991. The GCC states paid lip service to Tehran in their endeavour to thrash out a Gulf security structure.

Desirious of playing a greater role in any future security set-up for the region, Iran lobbied actively for its inclusion in the security arrangements of the region. The Damascus Declaration deliberately kept Iran out of a possible emerging security network for the Persian Gulf. One reason for Iran's exclusion was its geostrategic position in the Gulf. An alliance with Iran would tantamount to recognizing Iran's predominant position in the Gulf which the GCC was not willing to do. Besides, the GCC states were skeptical of the ability of Tehran to function within the evolving pro-Western security structure.

Despite the GCC's endeavour to hammer out an exclusive Arab strategy for the security of the Gulf a split developed in its ranks. Following Kuwait's initiative a number of bilateral defence agreements were signed with the US and other European states. This exposed the lack of faith of the
GCC states on any regional security tie up. The Iranian contention that the security of the Gulf should be the responsibility of the littoral states and external powers should be kept out, found no takers.

Expressing grave concern over its exclusion from the regional security structure, Tehran launched a major arms acquisition programme. It even accelerated its nuclear weapon programme to meet the challenge posed by the GCC head on.

Having emerged as an independent actor in the region after the war, Iran was aggrieved by the isolation thrust upon it by the GCC states. It used the Abu Musa crisis of April 1992 to show that there cannot be any viable security tie up without Iran. The Iranian action in Abu Musa was fuelled by its desire to probe the GCC states capabilities and intentions after their security arrangements with the West. The Americans adopted a low profile during the crisis. It urged the GCC to do more for their own collective security.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the lumbering US presence in the area, Iran began a fraternization process in the Central Asian / Caucasian region in order to break its probable isolation and buttress its bargaining position vis-a-vis the Persian Gulf. All the Central Asian republics are Muslims and Islam being a dominant force there provided Iran with an opportunity to garner their support. In Uzbekistan a large and important Shia community exists with historical ties with Iran. The Caucasian republic of Azerbaijan, separated by the Caspian
Sea from the other five republics of Central Asia, is predominantly Shiite. Iran, situated between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, saw itself as a bridge between the North and South. It is a potential route for Iran to the Black Sea and Europe through Transcaucasia, and to China and Pacific through Central Asia. The fragmentation of the Soviet Union brought potential risks for Iran. The whole hinterland of Iran now lay exposed to pro-western Turkish influence. By cultivating the Central Asian republics Iran not only hoped to stretch the crisis prone area but also to acquire strategic depth vis-a-vis the GCC.

Though the Iranian diplomatic endeavour in Central Asia was successful in garnering close economic and cultural ties with the formation of the Caspian Sea Littoral State Organization and the Association of Persian Speaking People, its effort to give a religious colour to Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) which is basically an economic organization has not met with any success. It should be remembered that the present leaders of these republics are former communists and hence are wary of Iran's Islamic credentials. Besides, Turkey and Pakistan, the other founder member of ECO, want to keep ECO as an economic organization. Iran on its part considers ECO as a prelude to the formation of a Islamic Common Market.

The growing clout of Iran in Central Asia and its emergence as a regional power is being viewed with concern in the Western Capitals, particularly in Washington. There is a trace of shadow boxing between Iran and the US. With the
burial of the "Communist ghost" the US has raised the bogey of the danger of "Islamic fundamentalism". The US might also use the following pretexts in making Iran its next target: (a) human rights, (b) ethnic composition, (c) oil production and price, (d) intervention in the internal affairs of other states, (e) and extra regional terrorism.

In order to check Iran's growing influence in the Central Asian region, Saudi Arabia, with US backing and encouragement, has begun to flash its Islamic credentials. Unlike Iran, Riyadh has petro-dollars to spare and it has demonstrated its willingness to spend lavishly to win over people to its side.

Motivated by the rivalry with Iran, Saudi Arabia might close ranks with Ankara to contain the growing influence of Iran in the Central Asian region. It might even enlist the support of Pakistan which is also active in the region. Both Saudi Arabia and Turkey are staunchly pro-West and with the encouragement of the West, particularly the United States, a nexus might develop between Riyadh and Ankar aimed at curtailing Iran's efforts of becoming a regional power. Were such a nexus to emerge in the future, it can pose serious problems for Tehran and create impediments for its ambitious policy in Central Asia.

The eight year war with Iraq and the subsequent turbulence in the Persian Gulf made Iran feel that the region is extremely volatile, and it must equip itself adequately to play the pre-eminent role that history and
geography have conferred on it. It perceives a pre-eminent role for itself in the Persian Gulf and will not allow others to undermine it. The inter-state and intra-state politics of the Arab region of the Persian Gulf continues to make Iran still relevant to the region.

The presence of Great powers in the region, at the "invitation" of their allies like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and the latter's belligerent attitude towards Iran, created a peculiar security environment in the region. This prompted the Iranian leadership to acquire military superiority and preparedness in the region for which a number of reason can be cited. First, long years of war had taught the Iranian leaders the lessons of not entering into a conflict unprepared and with inferior arms, especially against a militarily well equipped enemy. Military deterrence, furthermore, achieved through a well armed and equipped military machine, was seen to promise future security for the Republic.

Preparedness, efficiency and firepower became essential aspects of the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) post-war military doctrine. Emphasis is laid on improving the air force and air firepower. Iran also embarked on developing its naval capabilities that would allow it to deny control of the Gulf and adjacent Arabian sea waters to hostile regional and American naval operations in the event of or during conflict. It has placed special emphases on missiles, mines and power projections and submarines.

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and the Desert
storm Iran has stepped up its efforts to improve existing chemical weapons and acquire biological and nuclear weapons. Iran's motivation for acquiring nuclear weapons are numerous. Possession of nuclear weapon enhances prestige and regional status. It would also have both strategic and political value, providing deterrence against nuclear threats and intimidation by other states. Nuclear weapons could reduce the military options of "global arrogance" -- those of the US and its allies -- in the region. Infact, if Baghdad had nuclear weapons the US might not have gone to war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait.

The current Iranian military effort indicates a substantial commitment by Iran's leadership since it is taking place at a time when funding is scarce. Iranian economy is beset with high inflation rate, growing population, unemployment, decline in income from oil sales and mounting debt. Despite these problems if Iran succeeds in building it military capabilities, growing economic distress might increase the incentives for external aggression.

However, as long as Tehran is conscious of US power and resolve it will not seek direct confrontation or even attempts to undermine the current regional order are likely to be limited by the lessons of Desert Storm. One move that Tehran can make is to acquire nuclear weapons or biological weapons (BW) before moving directly against the GCC states. It might hope that these weapons would deter the US and its allies from intervening to oppose it. It might also believe
that such a capability would intimidate the GCC states into not inviting the US or other Western forces to intervene. Iran could also indirectly try to destabilise or even overthrow GCC governments, and to present the US and its allies with an ambiguous situation that complicates their response.

By virtue of its geostrategic location and its huge resources, Iran continues to be the most important country in the region, which is both a source of concern and a sense of relief for its neighbours. However, the pro-Western security structure that emerged after the Kuwaiti crisis was seen in Tehran as a challenge to its dominant power position in the Persian Gulf.

In Central Asia, where Iran has established a firm base, it found its interests being challenged by Saudi Arabia and Turkey with the US support and encouragement. The entangle in Afghanistan continues to worry Tehran as it poses a security threat to its borders. Moreover, the presence of more than a million Afghan refugees on its soil is proving to be a burden both in terms of drain on scarce resources as well as for security implications. It has activated its diplomacy in Afghanistan to bring about a peaceful end to the conflict. This is motivated more so because of its competition with Islamabad, an ally of the US, which is actively supporting the Taliban forces opposed to Tehran.
The Iranian arms build-up has to be looked into in this light. It is perhaps motivated partly by legitimate reasons for self defence and partly by the desire for achieving regional dominance.